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PART II

Experimenting with Ritual

Natives Here, Natives There

Chapter 3

The Red and the Black

A Practical Experiment for Thinking about Ritual

Michael Houseman

Abstract

This essay reports on the performance of an initiatory rite of the author's invention, undertaken as a practical experiment for thinking about certain recurrent features of ritual action and, specifically, of (male) initiation. In keeping with an approach that sees ritual as the enactment of special relationships, this initiation, The Red and the Black, was designed to demonstrate the importance of interactive patterning both for the structuring of ritual performance and for the participants' commitment to the relationships they ritually enact. Its meaningfulness, as well as its capacity to affect the participants' perceptions and ideas, is shown to derive less from the (minimal) explicit symbolism it employs, the beliefs it presupposes, or the social functions that can be attributed to it than from the relational entailments of the coordinate interactions it involves. Framing, simulation, secrecy, imposed suffering, symbolism, ceremonial efficacy, ritual condensation, and the complex interplay of in-group and out-group perspectives are among the issues that are illustrated and discussed.

Key words: Initiation rites, interaction, ritual condensation, ritual efficacy, secrecy, symbolism

In order to explore ritual action 'in its own right' ("in itself and for itself," as Lévi-Strauss [1971, 598] advises), I have subjected students and seminar participants to a bare-bones male initiation rite of my own invention—The Red and the Black. In recounting this venture, I describe a number of recurrent features of ritual action and, specifically, of (male) initiation rites.

Introduction

This experiment was designed to illustrate and further substantiate ideas developed elsewhere in connection with a particular 'relational' approach to the

analysis of ritual performance (Houseman 1993, 2000, 2002; Houseman and Severi 1998). According to this approach, ritual is envisaged as an enactment of relationships: those between human participants but also those embedded in a network of interpersonal ties with other, nonhuman entities, such as spirits, gods, ancestors, animals, objects, liturgical formulae. Because these relationships are acted out and not merely referred to, they are not logical or metaphorical connections between abstract terms or categories, but personal experiences sustained by intentionally and emotionally laden events. However, the relationships people act out in ritual are unusual in several respects. First, because they bring together into a single sequence of action features drawn from a wide variety of domains (subsistence, the life cycle, kinship, other ceremonial events), ritual relationships reframe these disparate elements as the interdependent components of a new experienced totality, namely, the ritual performance itself. Thus, they are not only highly evocative but exceptionally integrative as well. Second, ritual relationships typically entail what Carlo Severi and I (1998) have called "ritual condensation," that is, the simultaneous enactment of nominally contrary modes of relationship: affirmations of identity are at the same time testimonies of difference, displays of authority are also demonstrations of subordination, the presence of persons or other beings is at once corroborated and denied, secrets are simultaneously dissimulated and revealed, and so forth. To the degree that ritual performances incorporate such singular situations, they are readily recognizable as distinct from everyday interaction: they cannot be fully accounted for in terms of ordinary intentionalities and patterns of relationship. Third, to the extent that these seemingly anomalous performances are nonetheless presumed to be meaningful (the pragmatic consequences and affective qualities of the ritual experience play an important role here), they are upheld by a degree of self-reference, a bracketing off, which confers a measure of indisputable authority upon them. They appear as necessary repetitions rather than as arbitrary inventions. Ritualization may thus be thought of as a process of recontextualization whose 'privileged' character (see Bell 1992) derives from the combination of these three properties: it is experientially grounded, highly integrative, and, owing to the systematic association of ordinarily antithetical modes of relationship, difficult to define in terms other than its own enactment.[1]

This perspective entails a number of complex issues only one of which I wish to address here, that of ritual efficacy. I understand ritual efficacy as referring to the production—subsequent to and beyond the ritual performance itself—of items of discourse and behavior that presuppose the relationships acted out in the course of the ritual's execution. The occurrence of such items of speech and action may be taken as a measure of the participants' commitment to the reality of the ritual relationships they enact. Ritual action, if it is efficacious, thus irreversibly affects ordinary intercourse in perceptible ways: before and after are not the same. From this point of view, ritualization is serious business, its efficacy quite different from the gratification that results from playing (or observing) a game or from observing (or participating in) a spectacle. My working

hypothesis is that this distinctive efficacy derives, above all, neither from rite's substantive symbolism, nor from its pragmatic consequences, nor finally from its performative qualities, but from the very enactment of the special relationships its performance implies. My intention was thus to design a ritual that consists essentially, if not solely, in a particular pattern of interaction: The Red and the Black belongs to no recognizable cultural tradition, it involves almost no explicit symbolism, its underlying 'beliefs' are overtly preposterous, its scenic qualities are minimal and little, if any, social function can be attributed to it.

I should say at the onset that most of what I will be reporting here was not thought out in advance. The 'design features' (see Handelman 1998) of The Red and the Black, while drawing upon several years' study of male initiation rites, came into being more or less full blown in a largely intuitive fashion. I was aiming at something as simple as possible and yet whose emergent, self-legitimizing properties would capture what I felt to be the essence of initiation: a discriminatory, identity-bestowing process whose ends (the initiated) are the means of its own reiteration (see Zempléni 1991). Basically, I looked to involve the participants in an undeniable, yet difficult to conceptualize interactive experience whose ostensive, arbitrary starting point (the difference between male and female) becomes, for them, an irrefutable, natural discrimination defined in terms of this experience and the conventional distinction (between the initiated and the uninitiated) it brings about (see Bourdieu 1986). Evidence for the efficacy of The Red and the Black as ritual was sought in the occurrence of subsequent behavior and speech among the participants in keeping with this paradoxical process of redefinition. While lasting commitment on the part of the participants seemed too much to expect, I was interested to see if even the slightest effect in this direction could be ascertained. For example, I was particularly on the lookout for spontaneous action and discourse implying that if women did not have access to the mysteries of The Red and the Black, this was not because they were not initiated, but *because they were women*. Such an allegation is true enough within the context of my contrived ritual: only the men are initiated. What I am suggesting, however, is that the efficacy of this (as any) ritual resides precisely in the fact that, as a result of its performance, assertions such as these are applied beyond the ritual frame to the world at large.

Preparation

The participants are forewarned (usually a week in advance) that they will be submitted to an initiation rite. They are told that while the men will undergo the ritual, the women will participate as well; indeed, the participation of all parties, they are told, is essential for the ritual to 'work.' Often I mention that there may be certain students who have already participated in The Red and the Black and will thus be able to guide the newcomers through it; if such persons are not present, I say, this won't matter because I will give instructions.[2]

> On the day the initiation is to take place, I hang a curtain across one of the corners of the room, close to where the most of the action will take place. I begin the class or seminar by introducing the ritual. While, at least initially, I never come out and say that I have invented The Red and the Black, my preliminary account makes this obvious. Writing "THE RED AND THE BLACK" on the white board, I explain that it is in fact an American ritual, but of Franco-Belgian origin (although no longer practiced in France or Belgium). Thus, I explain, one can come across a number of oblique references to this rite in francophone culture: Stendhal (most French students have read or heard of his novel *Le rouge et le noir*), Jacques Brel (a popular Belgian vocalist who sings of the red and the black), and the Société Générale (a French bank whose logo is composed of two red and black rectangles) are given as examples. This Franco-Belgian source accounts for the fact that the language used during the rite's performance is not English but French. Thus, I conclude, once the ritual begins, only French will be spoken (of course, nothing but French is ever spoken in my classes).

One of the problems posed by this experiment is that of framing: it is exceedingly difficult to bootstrap a ritual frame or context into place. The point of departure of this exercise is implicitly a play situation (let's play at doing a ritual). However, if the participants undergo The Red and the Black with the idea that they are merely playing or pretending, the performance loses its efficacy as a ritual: no one expects it to have any real effect on ordinary life.[3] So my problem is how to make The Red and the Black 'serious' enough. My authority as a teacher or lecturer helps, but only up to a point, as the students are party to the experimental nature of this initiative. Thus, I am caught in somewhat of a bind. If I don't take The Red and the Black seriously, neither do the other participants. But if I do take it seriously, they don't take *me* seriously, and so it becomes just another type of game.

The solution I have adopted is to treat patently ludicrous propositions with obviously feigned gravity, calling into question the playful nature of the enterprise by means of a double negative. I propose a ritual experiment rather than a ritual experience. In other words, instead of simulating a true ritual performance, I pretend to simulate a false one. In doing this, my aim is to undermine the play frame from within, notably by making the rules or conventions—whose existence is supposed by any recognition of an activity as an instance of play—overtly confusing and, ideally, at once constitutive and self-contradictory. Through this type of implicit frame-challenging, I try to establish the exceptional character of what is to be undertaken, all the while keeping its exact nature unclear: one has to actually participate in The Red and the Black in order to understand what kind of activity it really is. Thus, my transparently ridiculous explanation of the ritual as being American of Franco-Belgian origin is associated, in a spurious fashion, with very real cultural references and with my own undeniable identity as an American transplanted in France, the latter being linked with my authority as teacher or lecturer. Also, the supposedly

francophone origin of the rite allows me to introduce the flagrantly nonsensical imperative of having to speak French during its performance. To introduce all this waffle, I write "THE RED AND THE BLACK" on the whiteboard. While being overbearingly didactic, this (like the references to Stendhal, Brel, and the Société Générale) is at the same time misleading, for, as we will see, one of the secrets of the ritual plays on the approximate homonymy of the French words *et* (and) and *est* (is): by writing the rite's name in English (justified by the fact that it is an American ritual), I establish *et* (and) as the default, natural interpretation of this phrase when it is spoken in French.

> Asking the men to leave the room, I give instructions—first to the women in the classroom and then to the men outside—on how to perform the ritual. To the women, I explain that they are to remain seated together at one end of the room. The men, whom I refer to as novices, will be brought in one by one and told to sit at a table facing the women at the other end of the room, about five to six meters away. I myself, the initiator, will sit at this same table facing the novice (with my back to the women). The women are to remain silent while the novice is brought in. However, once he is seated, they are to begin mumbling to themselves (they can say anything they like), just loud enough so that they cannot hear what I will be saying to the novice. It is important, I say, that they not hear what is being said, but it is also important that they pay close attention to the novice's performance, as by doing so they will be lending support to the novice while he is undergoing the rite. I tell the women that at one point, the novice will cry out. When this happens, they are to stop their mumbling and either to acclaim the novice or (in certain performances) to sigh very loudly with relief. Finally, I tell them that the novice will loudly announce "Le rouge et le noir" (The red and the black) and they are to answer, equally loudly, "Oui, le rouge et le noir" (Yes, the red and the black).
>
> To the men, I explain that they will be brought in one at a time. While each is undergoing the ritual, those waiting to be called are to stay in the hallway. As the door will remain partially open, they will be able to hear what is going on; however, I tell them that they must not look, as this would detract from the ritual. Often I say that there is nothing to see anyway. Finally, I explain that they must do what I will tell them to do, or the ritual won't 'work' right.

In order to lay the groundwork for the participants' commitment to the ritual realities they will enact, I provide neither the novices nor the women with a description of the initiation process in its entirety, but only with just enough information for them to properly assume their respective roles. By preventing the participants from conceptualizing the ritual in a detached fashion, I encourage them to experience it directly by having to adopt particular points of view relative to each other within the context of its performance. At the same time, my instructions aim to promote a smooth meshing of their actions such that an

overall relational dynamic may come into being. Thus, the participants' understanding of the ritual as a distinct totality is not provided in advance but progressively constructed by them in a personally motivated fashion; it derives from their own perceptions and behavior as dictated by their coordinate interaction.

I take a longer time with the women, to whom I give more responsibility, than I do with the novices. The latter, left pretty much in the dark, are rendered clearly dependent upon what I, the initiator, will tell them to do, while the women, who are more informed about what will happen, are nevertheless obliged, as outsiders, to take their cue from the novices. This sets up an interesting tension that acts as an implicit mainspring for the ritual's performance: on the one hand, the women may presume that the novices (who are supposed to be in on the secret) have been provided with privileged information, whereas in fact they have not; on the other hand, the novices, all the while knowing that the women are the ostensibly excluded party, cannot but be aware of the fact that they might know more than their behavior lets on. The uneasiness inherent in this situation is heightened by the fact that once the ritual begins, the women will be able to see but not hear what goes on at the table at the other end of the room, whereas the novices waiting outside will be able to hear the women's mumbling but not see what role they play. This tension is further accentuated by the silent negotiations that invariably take place both between the waiting novices as to the order in which they are to be initiated and between the women as to whether they are following their instructions correctly. Finally, it should be noted that this tension immediately breaks down when even the slightest visual communication occurs between the women and the waiting novices (in one unhappy instance that detracted significantly from the rite's solemnity, there was a glass door leading to the hallway with the result that some novices were able to see that the women noticed that the novices could see them).

> The last two times I have organized The Red and the Black, after giving instructions, I have invited the men back into the room to participate with the women in a preparatory exercise. Having everyone sit down, I ask the participants to put their hands on the table in front of them and to close their eyes, to relax and get comfortable. I do this exercise along with them. I ask them (saying that certain people might find it easier if they put their head to one side) to make a small, piteous, whining sound, just loud enough that only they themselves can hear it. After thirty seconds or so, I tell them to keep their eyes shut and their hands on the table but to lift their heads and open their mouths as wide as they can. "Wider," I say, "Wider than that!" "Still wider!" I then ask them to keep their eyes closed and to pretend that their hands are stuck to the table and that, however hard they try, they are unable to move them. After a minute, I tell them that their hands are still stuck to the table but that they can open their eyes. A minute later, I tell them that they can move their hands. Finally, I tell them that the exercise is over.

This preliminary exercise is useful because it sets the pattern for what in many ways is the essence of ritual experience. The participants become personally engaged in prescribed, emotionally charged, bodily actions whose exact meaning remains nonetheless unclear. The pragmatic supposition that intuitively governs ordinary interaction—that is, that outward actions express private feelings and intentions—is inverted. Within the framework of this preparatory exercise, it is the participants' stipulated behavior that becomes the wellspring of their individual experience. The exact nature of the feelings induced by having to whine to oneself, to force one's mouth ever open, to act as though one's hands are stuck to the desk, and so forth, is unimportant, and remains, one may suppose, largely a function of the personality of each participant. Indeed, the exercise, by calling upon a wide range of possible emotions (self-pity, frustration, stress, relief), is designed to leave a fair amount of leeway for individual involvement so that each participant will make this collectively imposed experience his or her own (what should I be feeling? how exactly should I whine? when exactly should I shut my mouth, and so on). Interestingly enough, many participants use this exercise to try to make sense of what follows. The novices speculate along these lines while waiting in the hallway, a number of them admitting afterwards that they expected the ritual to be linked to the exercise (some participants, for example, went through the entire ritual with their hands flat on the desk in front of them). Here again, in much the same way that what is crucial is not the specific affective states the participants' acts may give rise to but the fact that their acts are invested with personal feeling and intentionality (animosity is welcome, indifference is not), what seems to count, insofar as the participants' commitment to the ritual is concerned, is less the precise interpretations they may make of their behavior than their presumption that this behavior is meaningful.

Performance

Once the preparatory exercise is over, I invite the men and the women to take their respective places so that the ritual may begin. While people are moving to their places, I put a black box and a red box side by side on the table at the end of the room opposite to where the women are seated. The boxes are sufficiently high so that the novice, when seated at the table facing the women (the black box is on the novice's left), cannot see what they contain. A white cloth covers the area of the desk between the chair to be occupied by the novice and the boxes, and on this cloth is a small white index card upon which I place my reading glasses. I sit on the other side of the table with my back to the women, facing the novice's chair. When everyone is silent, I rise, turn around, and tell them that the ritual will now begin.

I go to the hallway and invite the man closest to the door to come in (when an initiated man, that is, one who has already gone through The Red and the Black, is present, I instruct him to do this for me). I indicate to the

novice that he should sit at the table on the chair facing the women, and I sit down facing him. The women begin their mumbling. Maintaining eye contact as much as possible, I welcome the novice to The Red and the Black. I inform him that I am going to ask him to place his left hand into the black box. He will feel something in the box. However, whatever it is he feels, his face must remain totally impassive. While he is doing this, I go on to say, he must read to himself what is written on the index card placed before him (in capital letters: "LE ROUGE ET LE NOIR" [the red and the black]). I take my glasses off the index card and tell him to put his left hand into the black box. "Do you feel something?" I ask. "Keep feeling around in the box. Do you feel something now?" The novice, keeping a straight face, indicates that he does (for indeed, at the bottom of the box, he feels something liquid and faintly slimy). I then tell him that before beginning the class or seminar I copiously spat into the box and that it is my spittle that he is touching. He struggles to not express disgust. While the novice takes his hand out of the box (often wiping it on the white cloth covering the table), I turn the index card over and place my reading glasses upon it again. I then tell the novice that I am going to ask him to place his right hand into the red box and that he might have to catch what it contains (as though there were something alive in the box). This may hurt him a little, I explain, but only very little (inside the red box is a small cactus plant). However, as soon as he touches what is in the box, he is to immediately cry out very loud. Finally, while he is doing this, he is to read to himself what is written on the back of the index card (it now reads: "LE ROUGE EST LE NOIR" [the red *is* the black]). I take my glasses off the card and tell him to put his right hand into the red box. When the novice feels the plant's prickles (some novices grab it firmly, while others merely touch it), he cries out as though in great pain. The women acclaim him or loudly sigh in relief. Once this is over, I loudly ask the novice to proclaim the mystery of the ritual, indicating with my eyes the index card in front of him. He announces "Le rouge est le noir," to which the women, as they have been instructed, answer "Oui, le rouge et le noir." I then shake the novice's hand, congratulate him on having gone through The Red and the Black and invite him to retire to the curtained-off corner of the room, telling him to face the wall and not to look out from behind the curtain.

The next novice is brought in and the process begins again. When the last novice has passed through and all of the novices are behind the curtained-off corner, I then ask them to come out and, facing the women together, to shout out once again the ritual's 'mystery': "Le rouge est le noir!" The women, at my prompting, answer once again, "Oui, le rouge et le noir!" Finally, I ask everyone to shout it out together one last time: "Le rouge est/et le noir!" I indicate that the ritual is now over and that we will take a five-minute break.

One of my goals in designing this ritual was to involve the participants in conventionalized behavior in which contrary attitudes and relationships become

inextricably combined. Thus, the actions that the participants are led to undertake are conceptually uncertain; they are easily recognizable as distinct from everyday intercourse and are difficult to define in terms other than their own enactment. Drawing upon a recurrent feature of male initiation (see Cohen 1964), the women are placed in a paradoxical communicative situation: it is *because* they interact with the men (they are aware that the latter hear their mumbling) that they are cut off from them (their mumbling prevents them from hearing what the initiator and the novices are saying). This ambiguous position is all the more demanding in that it is the women themselves who must determine, from the changing noise level around the table, just how loud their mumbling should be. During the rite, they often glance at each other, checking as to the appropriateness of their respective noise-making (those who have participated in a previous performance tend to set the pitch). Moreover, while the women have been instructed to pay close attention to the novice's behavior, at the same time, their having to constantly mumble becomes extremely tedious for them. Thus, their utterances are rapidly reduced to a concatenation of nonsense syllables, merging into a sort of collectively produced verbal resonance that spontaneously acquires a semimusical quality.

The novices are also placed in a contradictory situation with respect to the women who are observing them. They must alternately express either significantly less or significantly more than they are actually made to feel: while having to surreptitiously suppress their disgust upon learning that they have been handling my spit in the black box, they must openly exaggerate the pain incurred by lightly touching the cactus in the red box. While incapable of disguising their anxiety regarding the trials they undergo, they must at the same time dissimulate their deception at the relatively innocuous character of these hardships. The secret revealed to the novices (the contents of the boxes) is disappointingly trivial, and this fact, as much as the nature of the boxes' contents, is the secret to which they are bound. There is of course a still further level of secrecy that the novices must also simultaneously acknowledge to themselves and conceal from the women: contrary to what the uninitiated may think, they *don't* really know what the boxes contain. About the black box, they know only what I tell them (and I lie about this: it is not spit but egg white mixed with a little water); about the red box they can only make informed guesses based on a fleeting tactile sensation (I hint that there might be something alive in the box, but this also is not entirely true). Thus, quite a number of novices, once their initiation is over, try to look inside the boxes; I, of course, do not allow this. In this way, the revelation of privileged, initiatory knowledge is at the same time an act of concealment both by the novices with respect to the women and by the initiator with respect to the novices themselves. Finally, I heighten the novices' aroused and disoriented state by asking them to do several things at once: put their hand in the box, react in a certain forced way to what they feel, read the index card in front of them, and listen to what I am telling them, all this with the women's ever-changing murmuring in the background. With fixed, nervous smiles or expressionless faces, they

gaze steadily into my eyes the whole time. It is indeed essential that the novices' ordeal, albeit of short duration, be both complex and fairly challenging: not only must the women be able to think that something nonself-evident to which they do not have access to is in fact going on, but the novices themselves must be made to feel that they have accomplished something which, while remaining partially mysterious for them as well, is unquestionably demanding and (therefore) significant.

This systematic conflation of disclosure and dissimulation, one of the hallmarks of the initiation process, is also played out at yet a further level with respect to the liturgical formula from which the ritual takes its name. This additional secret, revealed to the novices when they are made to read first the front and then the back of the index card to themselves, is that "The red *and* the black" (Le rouge *et* le noir) is really, or is also, "The red *is* the black" (Le rouge *est* le noir). Unlike the enigma of the boxes' contents, this secret is made entirely accessible to the novices. However, here again, the word play involved is distressingly inconsequential; it relates solely to the ritual and has no value whatsoever beyond. Indeed, the actual content of this secret is of much less import than the relational pattern its communication implies. Having been revealed to the novices, this secret is then communicated to the women by each novice when, at the end of his initiation, I loudly ask him, indicating the index card on the table, to declaim the central 'mystery ' of the rite. However, because *est* and *et* are more or less homonymous, this revelation is at the same time the very means of this mystery's dissimulation: while the novices openly announce "Le rouge *est* le noir," the women, who, like the novices, have been misdirected before the ritual begins, cannot but understand "Le rouge *et* le noir."[4]

The secrets revealed in the course of The Red and the Black—like most, if not all, initiatory mysteries—are calculated to be partially inaccessible and/or largely trivial and, at the same time, highly significant in terms of the interactive configurations their transmission puts into effect. The substantive contents of these secrets—what the boxes contain, the words exchanged between the initiator and novices, the various interpretations allowed by the utterance "Le rouge et/est le noir—have little importance in and of themselves.[5] They constitute above all the tangible, if somewhat unintelligible, indexes for the initiatory experience and the discriminatory patterns of relationship that the participants are made to enact. In other words, these secrets do not so much contain a singular message as they give rise to a special context. Specifically, the participants find themselves caught up, simultaneously, in two very different modes of dissimulation: in the one, secrecy is openly admitted (e.g., the women are made aware of the fact that they don't know what is in the boxes); in the other, it is surreptitiously concealed (e.g., the women remain unaware of the "et"/"est" homonymy and of the fact that the novices don't really know what the boxes contain). As I have argued for initiation generally (Houseman 1993), it is the systemic articulation of these two contrary modes of secrecy that provides the privileged grounds for what might be called The Red and the Black's ritual

"work" (Houseman and Severi 1998, 254, 263): on the one hand, the designation of particular agencies (the novices, the initiator, and the uninitiated, but also, potentially, the boxes, the index card, etc.); on the other, the emergence of a specific idiom whereby the relationships between these agencies may be expressed (symbolism).

The ritual condensation of avowed concealment and veiled dissimulation gives rise to a distinctive field or context of communication in which every revelation seems to generate the supposition of still further levels of secrecy and even the most trivial acts may take on new, secret yet partially indefinite meaning (cf. Barth 1975). Two points, however, are worth stressing. First, this distinctive field or context comes into being not as the result of abstract operations, but through the intentionally and emotionally laden bodily experiences afforded by the ritual action itself: the novices' discomfort, their understated or exaggerated expressions of feeling, their ambivalent attitudes vis-à-vis the women, the latter's frustration and forced complicity, and so forth, all play an essential role. Second, while these experiences may prove striking in themselves, they are mainly significant in that they contribute to an overall dynamic in which the different parties' participation is mutually reinforcing. In other words, it is less the particular items of behavior that counts as it is the relational configuration of which these behaviors form a part. It is this higher order of interactive integration that allows ritual performances to absorb 'errors' in execution without becoming corrupted, and to accommodate considerable personal (and historical) variation.

One of the most interesting aspects of this experiment, as revealed in discussion afterwards, is how the novices and the women perceive their coordinate interaction. While waiting outside in the hallway, most of the novices feel the women's mumblings to be threatening or complaining, an impression that is accentuated when, following the absolute silence that greets the novice when he is led into the room, the women begin their noise-making as soon as he sits down.[6] While some of the novices later said that they were confused as to what expression they should adopt in front of the women, many admit that while seated at the table, they are so focused on my instructions that they are largely unaware of the women's mumbling. All are taken aback to hear the women collectively sigh or acclaim them once they cry out in pretended pain. After a further moment of tension and disorientation when the women then fall suddenly silent (this was unplanned on my part), the novice addresses the women directly, challenging them by saying out loud (as I tell them to) the rite's central mystery, "Le rouge est le noir," to which the women collectively answer, "Oui, le rouge et le noir." Following this final deception vis-à-vis the women, the novice is led off to stand silently in the curtained-off corner of the room, from where he can listen to the initiation of the remaining novices. The first novices to go behind the curtain invariably set the emotional tone for those who join them later on. However, whatever the general attitude they adopt—in some performances it is impressionably solemn, in others more happy-go-lucky—most of the novices afterwards said that this

period of collective seclusion is a relaxed and carefree one during which they often congratulate each other and welcome newcomers to the group. Significantly, almost all agreed that during this time, they felt the women's mumbling to be caring and supportive (following one performance one novice even thanked the women for their encouragement, while several commented upon the women's feelings of relief). Finally, when the novices triumphantly emerge from behind the curtain to face the women and declare together "Le rouge *est* le noir"—to which the women can only answer, "Oui, le rouge *et* le noir"—the novices' anxiety regarding the women and the ritual itself has disappeared, to be replaced by an attitude of self-conscious swaggering and collective smugness ("From that moment on, I am a different person," later observed one man).

In contrast, the women, while experiencing their mumbling to be at once or (for some) alternately intimidating and encouraging, maintained that they were unaware of these changes in the novices' attitudes towards their noise-making. Mostly, as they later admitted, they were simply bored and, as I mentioned, spent quite a bit of time silently consulting with each other. This feeling of boredom, however, should not be confused with indifference, for it turned out to conceal something more complex, a sort of passive or purely reactive arousal, resulting, it would seem, from their paradoxical situation. Thus, one remarkable finding that emerged in discussion afterwards was that almost all of the women, in spite of being, by their own admission, extremely interested in what was happening with the boxes on the table at the other end of the room, pointedly did not try to figure out what was in them or what exactly was going on; one woman was hesitant even to look at the table, whereas most of the women later said that they paid closer attention to the novice's eyes and face rather than to his actions.[7] In other words, while watchfully orchestrating their behavior in accordance with the initiator's and novices' actions—starting, stopping, and modulating their mumbling at the right times, sighing (or acclaiming), and responding at the correct moments—the women carefully denied themselves the means of acquiring the knowledge that they felt they had no right to have. (This was especially true for those women participating in the ritual for the second time; their overriding concern was that they properly play their assigned role.) Interestingly enough, the one thing that the women *did* pay close and continued attention to was the group of newly initiated novices partially hidden behind the curtained-off corner. Novices who had gone through the initiation process were somehow easier for the women to spy upon and speculate about, as though this increasingly large, dissimulated, living mass that emerged from the initiation process— a sort of initiatory entity in its own right—was, in part, of their own making. From the women's point of view, it is thus in close to perfect affective harmony that, at the end of rite, the men and the women face each other and shout out together, "Le rouge est/et le noir!"

Aftermath

> After five minutes, during which I put the boxes and the white cloth away and place the tables and chairs back in their usual arrangement, I ask everyone to come back in and sit down. In order to initiate discussion, I ask them to write down on a piece of paper (which they will hand in to me) whether they are male or female and to indicate what they talked about and with whom during the break.

This often gives very interesting results. Not only do the participants tend, at least initially, to form sexually segregated groups during the break (one woman wrote: "Now that they are initiated, they won't speak to us"), but they often refer to themselves and to each other in terms of their ritual roles ("novices" vs. "women" or "initiated" vs. "uninitiated"). Quite a number of people, in spite of my announcing that The Red and the Black was over, wondered aloud whether the ritual wasn't still going on. Invariably, some of the women ask the men questions (the men never ask the women anything!), such as: "What was it like?" "Did it really hurt?" "What is in the boxes?" "What did Houseman tell you?" Almost always, such questions were met with obfuscation or a refusal to answer. Typical answers included "We can't say because we are initiated" or "I can't tell you because you are a woman."

Let me give some examples. Several women asked one man if he felt different since being initiated and if he suffered a lot, receiving a "yes" answer to both questions. One woman asked a man whether he was really hurt, or if he cried out because he was told to. "Of course it hurt," he replied, "if not, we wouldn't have cried out." "What was it?" she then asked. "It is not for women to know," he answered. One man, upon being asked what the initiator told him to do, answered, "Place a hand in the red box first and then in the black box next," thereby revealing nothing (although getting the order of the boxes wrong). Another, to justify his refusal, declared: "The women have it easy; we earned it. We men have paid for it." Still another explained: "I told the women that they were unable to understand what happened because they were women." One man reported a discussion with two women and two other men in which the latter declared: "We won't tell the secret even if we know that everybody knows it." One woman described the following conversation between a group of women and a group of men: "Do you feel changed?" "Yes, we know things that you will never know." "That's true, we are women." Similarly, one woman, speaking of a group of women talking with an initiated man, wrote: "We didn't ask him to describe the ritual, women not having access to this type of secret." One woman overheard another woman asking a man what was in the boxes; to the man's silence, she replied: "Men have their secrets, and women have theirs." Some women complained that they should have their own initiation. There were also some really intriguing, exceptional accounts. One woman wrote: "I talked with an initiated man, asking if he was really changed. He said yes, but I didn't believe him," while a man wrote that while speaking in a mixed group,

he asked that nothing of the rite be revealed, mentioning that the punishment for doing so was to get one's hand cut off. One previously initiated man told a group of new initiates that "the ritual can be a lot harsher," and another man told a group of women that there was a snake in the red box.

Twice, following the performance, one of the men revealed that "spit" was in the box. However, in one case (in which the man preceded this declaration by saying that "supernatural things happened and that the novices were humiliated"), this caused a great outcry from the other men, who, according to their accounts, felt betrayed and told him to shut up (one of them wrote that so-and-so had indeed revealed the secret, and that "in doing so he was a bad initiate and that we [the other men] are going to beat him up after class"). In the other instance, the women listened but a number of them wrote down that they didn't believe what the man told them, or, more exactly, didn't think that that could be the whole story (this in spite of the fact that when one of the men revealed this secret, another man participating in the discussion said that he was reassured, because he himself wondered what the box really contained). Some accounts revealed that a number of men, talking among themselves, wondered whether they had performed correctly and if they had been told the same thing; none of them, however, revealed to the others what they had been told.

According to a number of accounts, some women reproached certain of the men for having given inadequate performances: they didn't cry out loudly enough. One woman, talking to a man who mistakenly cried out while putting his hand in the black box, observed: "You are the only one who is not even capable of being initiated properly." During one performance at which there were a great many men, only some of them were called in to be initiated. The others, having spent the whole time in the hallway, asked the initiated participants to let them in on the secret, but to no avail. Surprisingly enough, many women participated in this continued exclusion. For example, one woman asked a group of these uninitiated novices if they didn't feel frustrated not to have been initiated, whereas one man wrote: "I'm still a novice and during the break I talked to one of the women who told me that I would never be a man. She didn't tell me anything about the initiation. One of the initiated I talked to explained to me that they had to put their hand first in water and next into something painful." One uninitiated novice, remarking to several women about the "sadistic tone" of the ritual because they applauded at the men's pain, was told, "You're never going to grow up." Another uninitiated novice wrote: "I didn't talk to the initiated, but listened very carefully."

Not all of the accounts handed in to me are revealing: some indicate that the participants talked to each other about something other than the ritual, while quite a few simply state "I talked with a man/woman." However, those accounts that do report on interchanges regarding The Red and the Black are clearly oriented in the same (expected) direction. Secrets are maintained and the existence of incommunicable mysteries actively implied. Moreover, this is often done in such a way that the supposition of the initiateds' authority and the uninitiateds' lack of understanding are upheld through the collusion of both sexes. Finally, a

remarkable number of accounts attest to the fact that secret knowledge is to be rightfully withheld from the women simply because they are women.

As I have suggested in the introduction to this essay, reactions such as these are more noteworthy than might first appear. The participants may not have a clear idea of the exact nature of the ritual or of what it 'says' about men and women, any more than they have of what it 'says,' for example, about red and black. However, precise interpretations regarding such matters, I would argue, are beside the point, optional, and largely idiosyncratic. More significant is the way in which the discriminatory relationships—acted out in the highly particular, artificially constructed context that is the ritual performance—appear to take on a life of their own. They seem to acquire the naturalized, self-evident quality that is the hallmark of everyday interaction.

The ritual performance provides the participants with an exceptional experience whereby speech and behavior consonant with the relational configuration realized in the course of this performance can be more easily entertained. The participants act and speak in such a way that implies (to themselves and to others), for example, that secrecy, suffering, restraint, silence, knowledge, and manhood on the one hand and, in complementary fashion, exclusion, menace, concern, noise-making, ignorance, and womanhood on the other are not related in an external, contingent manner but in an internal, constitutive one. In this respect, the interactive logic governing the conversations during the break (as revealed in subsequent discussions) is highly significant. It is not that the women constantly pestered the newly initiated to the point that the latter were forced either to reject their advances or to concede scraps of information to them. Rather, the newly initiated paraded themselves in such a way as to invite the women's questioning, precisely so as to be able rebuff them in this way. It is less that the women were stirred by a pressing need to know than it is that the men solicited proof of the women's frustrated ignorance. Indeed, what for the men was an act of exclusion lying at the very heart of their distinctive status was, for a fair number of women, a tolerant complicity towards the newly initiateds' apparent need to flout largely trivial secrets of their own. In other words, The Red and the Black seems to encourage male and female participants to define their sexual identity interdependently, that is, in relation to each other in terms of their respective ritual experiences. In this way, the participants' actions and words beyond the ritual frame tell the tale of their commitment not to abstract 'beliefs,' but to the reality of the relationships they ritually enact. In terms of efficacy, I suspect that one cannot honestly expect more from *any* ceremonial event.[8]

Let me try to be as clear as possible about this. The Red and the Black, like rituals generally, does not create anything ex nihilo: unequal relations between men and women in modern Western culture are as much a premise as a result of its performance. However, what this ritual *does* do is lend new life to sexual discrimination by couching it in the idiom of the largely irrefutable yet difficult to define experience afforded by the ceremonial performance. Certain statements or items of behavior that, in ordinary circumstances, might appear unacceptable or

outlandish to almost all of the participants—such as explicit claims to the effect that men are inherently superior to women—became, as a result of taking part in The Red and the Black, easier to say and do for all concerned. In some cases, these discriminatory assertions or acts were undertaken—partially, at least—in jest. The Red and the Black authorized the participants, who were for the most part anthropology students, to 'play' at being initiates and uninitiated (such play being, of course, informed by expectations based on prior readings of initiation rituals). However, such playfulness, which also takes place in real initiations, in no way detracts from this behavior's very real effects: sexual antagonism, male solidarity, female self-censuring complicity, prejudiced attitudes towards persons not participating in the ritual, and so forth. In other words, discriminatory discourse and conduct favored by participating in the performance, once said and done, acquire a communicative reality in their own right, anchored in the ritual experience itself: in order to really understand how such assertions and actions are possible—well, you have to go though The Red and the Black. According to this view, then, ritual performance does rather less than more. However, as a distinctive mode of cultural transmission, what it does is immensely significant: it packages recurrent values and ideas in the form of personally invested, highly memorable, self-referential enactments.

Discussion

The Red and the Black also serves a pedagogical purpose. Thus, once I have collected the participants' papers, I initiate a general discussion of the ritual, which invariably goes off in all directions at once. I try to touch upon certain themes that open up onto more general issues regarding some of the entailments of ritual action.

One striking feature, already mentioned, is the ease with which the performance is able to accommodate blunders and variations. One man, for example, cried out when putting his hand into the *black* box, while another, having understood me to say that he *should* express his feelings when touching my spit, made a great disgusted noise. A few of the men actually held on to the cactus plant in the red box such that I had to tell them several times to drop it before they let go. Quite a number of men revealed in the discussion that they did not realize that "The red *is* the black" was written on the back of the index card, while some of them admitted that they were so nervous, they didn't even remember what I had said to them. And, of course, there is considerable variety in the way individual novices and women perform: some men cry out more convincingly than others; some women are more applied than others in their mumbling. There is, one must imagine, a limit as to how much deviation from the established protocol the performance can stand. However, I was surprised at just how little such disparities disrupted the ritual or diminished its apparent effectiveness. This is due, I suggest, at least in part, to the fact that ritual performances are less based on an ordered sequence of behaviors (i.e., a script) than

oriented towards the generation of interactive patterns whose systemic qualities tend to override the individual irregularities that inevitably occur.[9] Thus, for example, it is interesting to observe to what degree the novices' and the women's attentiveness are dependent upon one another. At one performance, the women, instead of mumbling to themselves, started speaking to each other in low voices about this, that, and whatever. The men's concentration was immediately broken: they began looking at the women instead of looking at me, and the performance itself took on the attributes of a game or spectacle.

In the same vein, discussion also reveals that successful ritual performance seems to rely less upon a convergence of the participants' dispositions and motivations than upon the systemic coordination of their overt actions in accordance with these outward relational patterns. Not only do individual novices and women have very different feelings about what they are doing, but their interpretations of what the other group is experiencing are often widely mistaken. Thus, for example, whereas the novices felt the women to be alternately complaining, threatening, supportive, and relieved, the women were mostly puzzled and bored. This in no way detracts from the ritual's efficacy.

Considerable variability also characterizes the participants' symbolic interpretations of the ritual. Recall that I tried to reduce the ritual's overt symbolism to a minimum. However, for a number of participants who presume their own and others' actions to be meaningful, certain aspects of the performance become the object of hermeneutic speculation. Death and blood are sometimes evoked in connection with black and red, respectively; one person claimed that these colors were particularly salient, culturally significant ones such that if the boxes had been blue and yellow, for example, the ritual wouldn't have worked as well. During the break, one woman asked a novice: "What phrase did the initiator pronounce when you put your hand in the [hurtful] red box? He told you, 'It's the women,' didn't he?" Several men wondered about the structural opposition between liquid and slimy (black box) on the one hand, and dry and prickly (red box) on the other. Finally, most interesting to me, one woman, who was participating for the second time, wrote: "While I was murmuring, I noticed everything that was red or black in the room, the way Houseman was dressed but also the fact that I had a red folder and two red pens and one black pen."[10] To my mind, this last account illustrates perfectly how ritual symbolism—a wide-ranging idiom rather than a precise code—*really* works: not by signifying a special message, but by indexing a privileged context.

The main symbolic features of The Red and the Black are simply what the participants are given to experience: the antagonistic complementarity of men and women, the association of red and black, the interdependence of concealed and avowed knowledge, the juxtaposition of silence and noise-making. What makes these features 'symbolic' is not the existence of particular, well-defined, hidden meanings, but the fact that they become the autoreferential vehicles for designating the system of relationships acted out in the course of the rite and the agencies that this system of relationships implies. Most of the participants, especially the novices, feel that having gone through The Red

and the Black *does* make a difference, but are hard put to explain exactly what this difference is. Those aspects of the ritual that allow them to refer to it in speech and action before falling back upon the time-honored tribute to the efficacy of initiation—you have to experience it to understand—constitute the rite's symbolism.

From this point of view, the most salient symbolic feature of The Red and the Black, its most persuasive "thought trap" (Smith 1979), is undoubtedly the pattern of secrecy it begets. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the participants are reluctant to talk about such matters, and, to tell the truth, so am I. Thus, rather than baldly expose the various deceptions that the ritual entails, I do something quite different. While revealing some secrets (such as the "and"/"is" homonymy or the supposed presence of spittle in the black box), I suggest the existence of others (such as the presence of something other than spittle in the black box or the contents of the red box), and in disclosing these further secrets, I intimate the existence of still further levels of dissimulation yet to be made known (such as my instructions to the novices or what goes on behind the curtained-off corner). This process of "secretion" (Zempléni 1976) often involves simultaneously playing myself against the participants and the men against the women. For example, in the middle of a discussion on another subject entirely, having previously disclosed that, contrary to what the novices were led to believe, there was no spittle in the box, I sometimes mention that I will now reveal the "real" secret of the ritual, which only the men will be able to understand. I then show the participants a white egg for a few seconds before putting it back into my pocket. Some of the men, who have experienced the sliminess of what is in the black box, show signs of understanding (but say nothing), while the women, who have not had this experience, do not make the connection (but seem to be aware that they are missing something). By setting up several increasingly obscure layers of secrecy in this way—secrets about secrets about secrets—my goal, as it is when I provide a blatantly spurious background for The Red and the Black before the rite begins, is to introduce a measure of confusion in the minds of the participants. At the beginning of the experiment, this confusion is introduced in order to undermine the 'play' frame, which is in danger of taking over. However, the mystification I instigate at the end of the experiment serves another purpose entirely. Initiation rites typically entail a lengthy process whereby new initiates are progressively returned to their daily lives, with various prohibitions and prescriptive measures persisting long after the initiation itself is over. In much the same way, I at once compound and dilute the secretive aspects of The Red and the Black in order to draw out the ritual frame as much as possible. By reproducing, under the guise of learned explanation, the interactive pattern enacted in the course of the ritual's performance, I try to extend, as gradually and as smoothly as possible, certain essential features of the ritual context into the realm of everyday interaction, thereby sustaining the rite's efficacy as much as I can. Thus, I always keep at least one secret for myself: for example, I never tell the participants that the egg I show them is a fake one.

(Self-)reflection

In keeping with the confessional tone of the preceding section, I would like to close this account by briefly considering the ritual efficacy of this experiment for the experimenter. This is not mere self-indulgence but raises a question rarely envisaged in the study of initiation rites: What makes the ritual efficacious for the initiators? Evoking the force of 'tradition' seems to beg the question, and in any case hardly seems to apply in this instance. The interactive aspects of The Red and the Black may help to account for how this performance acquires singular significance for the novices and for the women, neither of whom have full access to what is going on. However, the situation is surely quite different for the initiating party who, as it were, holds all the cards. In other words, what might it be that prevents me, as the initiator, from experiencing The Red and the Black as a case of straight-out bamboozlement or intimidation, a harmless manipulation of others in the name of a worthy cause (anthropological theory)? As revealed by the way I discuss the ritual's secrets afterwards, I am reticent to completely debunk The Red and the Black. Why should this be so?

I have argued elsewhere (2002) that for the officiants, the ritual efficacy of initiation (and of ritual action generally) derives essentially not from the interactive maneuvering of human participants, such as the novices and the uninitiated women, but from the manipulation of nonpersons: objects, spells, animals, and the like. Such manipulative operations, which I called "simulations" as opposed to "dissimulations," involving the coordination of other participants' actions act to set up, in the minds of the officiants (and others), a circular relationship between the ritual activities they undertake and their aptitude to undertake them. These operations, I suggested, in which representation and causality are typically made to converge (cf. Boyer 1990), most often take place in preparation for or subsequent to the ritual performance itself, that is, at a further remove from the other participants' experience of the rite.

It seems to me that something very much along these lines occurs in The Red and the Black. As one student observed, the enormous importance I attribute to the "and"/"is" deception, in spite of the fact that this supposedly supreme mystery is grasped by only some of the novices (the women, of course, are in principle unaware that it even exists), is in itself worthy of note. It is perhaps no accident that my overriding concern is with what is the performance's only explicitly liturgical feature. I confess that, somewhat perversely, the ignorance of many of the novices regarding this secret acts to justify rather than invalidate my concern, as though I have become convinced that one really has to be initiated several times in order to truly understand what the ritual is about.

In much the same way, but perhaps more obviously, can be viewed the care I always take to use the same material apparatus: the same boxes, the same white cloth (which I carefully iron the night before), the same cactus plant, and so forth. When, for example, upon retiring to the bathroom to prepare the ritual,

I see the dried traces of egg white from previous performances in the bottom of the black box, I find this strangely reassuring. I also find it fitting to be entirely dressed in red and black on the day of the performance (I am not alone in this: one woman who had already been through the ritual showed up in red and black as well). Finally, I always put on a pair of black underwear. Now, this last element is especially worthy of attention. There is no doubt that doing this tickles me because here is a still further level of secrecy that no one (save you, gentle reader) is aware of. However, what is above all worth emphasizing about these private, preparatory goings-on (especially the black underwear) is that, from the other participants' perspective, they are totally superfluous. To the extent that The Red and the Black might be said to have any ritual efficacy whatsoever, this is surely the case regardless of the color of my underwear. I am forced to conclude that if I undertake these operations, it is because they make the ritual more efficacious for me, the initiator. Specifically, it is precisely *because* this preparatory behavior is so uncalled for from the other participants' point of view—and therefore not reducible to a case of artificially induced dissimulation—that, for me, the ritual and my role in it take on added (if somewhat obscure) meaning: it is what makes me and not them the initiator. My underwear has become the tangible touchstone for my own commitment to the effect that something 'serious' is going on.

Now, I don't 'believe,' even for a second, that The Red and the Black is a real initiation rite or that I am a real ritual officiant, and yet, doing these things as I have done them before—retrospectively, it seems to me that even the first time I did them, I thought that I *should* have done them before (cf. Casajus 1993)—I feel more in keeping with what the ritual (not the experiment) is about. They just seem right. Better still, as past performances suggest, they seem to work. In short, I suspect that like Lévi-Strauss's reluctant shaman (1958), by dint of organizing this damn The Red and the Black, I have been hoisted by my own petard.

A Final Note

In the interests of academic closure, let me end by considering certain issues that the public, initiate-tells-all nature of the present account might itself have raised. Has everything been revealed? One of the points I have aimed to get across is just how indeterminate such a question really is. As should be clear, within the context of The Red and the Black's performance, the existence of particular substantive secrets becomes increasingly overshadowed by the presumption of secrecy that is generated through the interactive pattern in which the participants (myself included) are involved. Indeed, to the degree that the experiment may be said to 'work' as an initiation rite, it entails a measure of bootstrapped circularity in which dissimulation gives rise to a specific relational form affording conditions for (further) dissimulation(s). One of my goals in conducting, discussing, and writing up this experiment has been to shed some light on the workings of what, in the end, becomes a self-organizing system.

This system, which I take to be the essence of the initiatory process, is interactively constrained but, in representational terms, eminently open-ended: in the manner of fractal phenomena, it implies the possibility of ever further levels of meaning to be explored. In this sense, there are always additional, unarticulated secrets that may be presumed to remain, which I (or the other participants) have only to think about in order to bring into being, less as 'things' to be hidden or disclosed than as premises to be reiterated and put into effect. In short, while I have indeed revealed everything that comes to mind, there is, by definition, no getting to the bottom of the secrets of The Red and the Black.

A second, related consideration concerns the impact that the present essay might have upon subsequent enactments. This is an empirical question that is difficult to answer in advance. On the basis of the reactions of those who have been through The Red and the Black several times, and who therefore have also participated in taking it apart afterwards, I suspect that it will have little effect: the coordinate acting out of relationships has its own systemic reasons that reason blissfully ignores. Hopefully, there will always be just enough personal involvement on the part of the participants for them to be pleasantly interested and surprised. My purpose, after all, is not to initiate people but to communicate something about initiation to them. The one person who is most likely to be affected is myself, insofar as describing The Red and the Black in such an exhaustive fashion makes me accountable in a way that sits uncomfortably with the mystifying, initiatory posture I inevitably assume when organizing this event. On the other hand, in the heat of the performance, it will be fairly easy for me to temporarily overlook the fact that I ever wrote this piece (if anyone asks, I'll tell them that it was all true, but …).

All in all, then, while it is likely that my career as an apprentice initiator is not entirely finished, perhaps the time has come for me to hand this particular exercise over to others. In any case, for a while now I have been toying with the idea of moving on to something else—sacrifice, for example.

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NOTES

1. For a fuller account of this approach to the interpretation of ritual, see Houseman (forthcoming).
2. I teach in the Religious Sciences section of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE) in Paris, a graduate-level school, which (as with all French universities) is very cheap and fairly open to outside persons wishing to audit classes. My course has no set curriculum, the only requirement being that I not repeat myself from one year to the next. Consequently, some students attend the class for several years, such that a certain number of them have been involved in the ritual several times. I have so far organized The Red and the Black five times over the last three years.
3. This is, I suspect, a general problem, for whereas games and other explicit instances of ludic activity commonly occur within rituals without calling the latter's seriousness into question, the status of ritual activity that proceeds from the premises of play appears to be more problematic (see Houseman 2001 for an illustration of 'pretending to pretend' in a ritual context; see Houseman 2003 for a discussion of the pragmatic suppositions governing play, ritual, spectacle, and ordinary interaction).
4. In order to make this dissimulated misunderstanding even more explicit, the last two times I have performed The Red and the Black, I have added the following dialogue between the novices behind the curtained-off corner and the women:

   Novices: "Le rouge est le noir"
   Women: "Oui, le rouge et le noir"
   Novices: "Non, le rouge est le noir"
   Women: "Le rouge et le noir" (interpretable by the novices as "Le rouge est le noir")
   Novices: "Oui, le rouge est le noir"

   From the novices' point of view, this dialogue, potentially at least, makes perfect sense, whereas for the women it makes no sense at all. Centered upon the phrase "No, the red is the black," it is built in such a way that the novices and the women are led to assume overtly each other's roles, all the while covertly confirming (for the novices) the separation between them.
5. One student, who had set up the camera to film the performance, later sent me the videocassette along with a set of paradoxical 'instructions' incorporating a still further homonymous confusion that neither I nor anyone else had thought of: "Le rouge hait le noir" (The red hates the black)!
6. An additional source of relational condensation is provided by those men who have already participated in the ritual. I instruct them to stand behind the seated novice and to touch his shoulders as lightly as possible. This behavior is interpreted by the novices, the observing women, and the initiated men alike as being at once protective and intimidating.
7. The women's concentration upon the novices' faces is particularly interesting. While the novices perceive themselves as being in plain sight of the women, several women picked up on the fact that my head and body partially block the women's view of the novices.
8. This suggestion relies on the general idea, put forward at the beginning of the essay, that ritual efficacy derives above all from the participants' coordinate engagement in the relationships (with human and nonhuman entities) they enact. In this perspective, initiation, while particularly amenable to analyses in such terms, is hardly exceptional.
9. The systemic properties of ritual performance, accentuating the participants' attunement to the expressive rhythms and effects entailed by their coordinate actions, also accounts for certain emergent, unplanned-for features of The Red and the Black, such as the women's suddenly falling silent after the novice cries out.
10. The only bit of 'symbolism' that almost everyone spontaneously adopted, which, significantly, had nothing to do with the ritual per se, was when I once made the mistake of referring to the curtain concealing the corner (which happened to be green) as "the forest."

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